

Meet Penina Taylor and chances are you won't be surprised that this articulate, passionate woman works as a successful countermissionary, delicately leading Jews away from messianic movements and ideologies that threaten to wrest them from the Jewish People. But you might be surprised to learn that Penina has developed her skills in the most painful and personal of ways. In a conversation with **Family First**, Penina retraces her life's path from secular Judaism to evangelical Christianity to Messianic Judaism, to the ultimate embrace of the religion of her forefathers

Coming Full Circle

Penina Taylor's Spiritual Journey from Evangelism to Judaism

MARGIE PENSAK

Penina Taylor is not your typical native of Lakewood, New Jersey. An articulate and accomplished professional in her late forties, Penina looks like any other *frum* North American Jew who now makes her home in Eretz Yisrael. You only need to speak to her for a few minutes, though, to discover that her life's experiences — and her life's mission — are hardly run-of-the-mill.

Born and raised in Lakewood, New Jersey, in a secular Jewish family, Penina discovered evangelical Christianity in her teens and married a Christian man. She and her husband raised their four children as religious Messianic Jews, and even established a Messianic congregation in Bowie, Maryland. Yet the story changed completely when the family moved to Baltimore in the nineties and began to connect with the *frum* community there. A major life change occurred, and today Penina is an outspoken anti-missionary — countering the force that held her captive for so long.

This is her amazing story.

A Real Relationship with G-d

Penina's early years were marked with tragedy. Although the world-renowned Beth Medrash Govoha was already in existence in Lakewood in the sixties, the yeshivah and all it stood for was a foreign concept to Penina and her secular Jewish family. After Penina's parents divorced when she was only four, she and her only sister suffered greatly from the family's restructuring.

"I suppose the seeds of Yiddishkeit were planted in me in fourth grade, when my paternal grandparents decided that my sister and I needed to have a Jewish education," Penina says. "They sent us to a Hebrew day school in Lakewood for almost two years. However, none of this Jewish education stuck, since it was not reinforced at home. My mother would warn me, 'Don't tell me how to run my life and my home.' I learned then that what I did in school stayed in school, and what I did at home stayed at home.

"When I got to high school, I got depressed thinking about my home life and my existence. If life was so painful, what was the point of living? One day, I overheard a Christian girl in my class trying to persuade a Jewish classmate to 'accept Yoshke' into her heart. Enraged at her audacity, I intervened to protect my friend from this girl's influence. This girl explained that everyone has problems, and that we needed to have a relationship with G-d through Yoshke. The Judaism I grew up learning about was always separated from G-d and having a relationship with Him; the importance of having such a relationship really rang true with me."

At the age of sixteen, Penina converted to Christianity. Her grades in school improved, and her mother eventually joined her in becoming Christian.

"I became best friends with a girl named Joy, whom I met at church during high school," Penina recalls. "I began dating her brother while I was in Bible college, and we decided to get married. I always dreamed my father would walk me down the aisle when I got married, so to reestablish our re-

What Do Countermissionaries Do, Anyway?

Shomrei Emet, an education-based countermissionary and outreach organization, exists to empower Jewish people across the religious spectrum, regardless of observance level or affiliation, in their Jewish experience. Many of its programs teach Jewish people how to answer challenges to their faith, especially from missionaries.

Some people question whether there is really a value in Torah-observant Jews learning about missionary claims — wouldn't it be better for them to just spend more time learning Jewish texts? According to Penina Taylor, the answer is both yes and no. Today's generation of young people is referred to as "Generation Y," but Penina calls it "Generation Why?"

"Many years ago," she explains, "it was enough for our parents and grandparents to tell us that Christianity wasn't for us; we should just stay away from it, and we did. Today's young people want to know why. They want to know why the Jewish people rejected Yoshke two thousand years ago, and continue to do so today. They want to know that there are good answers to missionary claims. They want a reason to stay Jewish."

Shomrei Emet gives them those reasons.

"One would think that in this day and age with all the information accessible — both Jewish and non-Jewish — people would be less intrigued by other religions, but unfortunately, that is not the case," Penina says. "Sadly, we are even seeing an increase in people from religious homes converting to Christianity. Part of this stems from our inability to transmit the beauty and meaning of Torah life. This is why one of my lectures is titled, 'Going from How to Wow: Making Judaism More Meaningful for the Next Generation.' There are so many kids from religious homes who aren't connecting to their Judaism and to Hashem in a meaningful way, and Christianity offers an enticing alternative. Messianic Judaism, which mixes Christian theology with the outward appearances of Judaism, blurs the lines between the two faiths, making it even more appealing to the Jewish seeker."

Penina works sixty hours a week to counter these two movements. While she uses many methods to make herself available to those who might need her assistance, she never goes after anyone. Instead, she tries to use every means possible to let the Jewish community at large know that she is there.

If the person she is dealing with starts throwing verses at her, she takes them back into the passage to read it in context and to look at it in the original Hebrew. Many of the arguments used by missionaries take verses out of context, mistranslating and misquoting Tanach. For some people, this is a very powerful tool. For others, their spiritual experience is more about emotions than logic, and requires a completely different approach.

relationship, with my mother's permission, I wrote him a letter asking him to visit."

Penina's father took her up on the offer and, while visiting, renewed his relationship with her mother. Since his former wife was now a born-again Christian, however, she could not remarry him unless he agreed to convert as well. Ever the devoted daughter, Penina immediately went out and bought her father a Christian Bible and taught him, too. He soon converted to Christianity, and her parents remarried. Six months later her father walked her down the aisle.

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Next Step: Messianic Judaism

Penina's husband was in the Air Force, and after their marriage they were stationed in England. Penina says, "One day, while praying, I felt Hashem telling me to light candles on Friday night. I told my husband this and asked him if I should. He said, 'If you think that is what G-d wants, do it.'"

"I had inherited my grandmother's candlesticks and my grandparents' Maxwell House Haggadahs. I remembered that the brachah for candlelighting was found in the Haggadah, and I used it to *bentsch licht* — all while I was intermarried and attending church Sunday mornings!

"One day," she continues, "my husband told me that he read in the 'Old Testament' that Jews were supposed to do certain things, including keeping kosher, and that we should give up pork and shellfish. Soon after, I learned in the New Testament about married women covering their hair. We asked our pastor, who was a Greek scholar, about this. It probably did mean that women should cover their hair, he said, but he could not teach it since women did not want to hear it."

The independent-minded Penina didn't care what other women did; she knew that if G-d wanted her to do something, it was her marching order. "I went out and bought hats. I was now lighting Shabbos candles, avoiding eating *treif*, and covering my hair. I was experiencing a spiritual identity crisis; my Jewish *neshamah* was at war with my Christian beliefs.

"At that point my parents came to visit us, and while helping them unpack, I found talleisim, yarmulkes, and shofars. They had discovered 'Messianic Judaism' — a concept I found very intriguing — and they hoped to convince Christian congregations to support Messianic Jews by accepting the Jewish need to maintain a Jewish identity, even while being Christians."

This seemed like the perfect solution to Penina's personal spiritual dilemma. Her father suggested that she and her husband start a Messianic congregation, which they did, in Bowie, Maryland, after moving back to the States in 1994. Penina became a voracious reader of Jewish books and bought a *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* in English, among other seforim. Reading about Torah-observant people led her and her husband, as well as her parents, to launch a subset of Messianic Judaism called the

"Association of Torah-Observant Messianics." This became a catalyst for exploring authentic Torah literature and observance, and Penina began confronting some real challenges in her faith.

"My husband, who was not Jewish, now adopted the Hebrew name of Pinchas and wore a yarmulke and tzitzis. We koshered our kitchen and kept Shabbos. We didn't cook or use electricity, but we drove to services on Saturday.

"By now, we had four children. In 2000, Pinchas and I attended an event in Baltimore, which subsequently led us to buy a house in its Orthodox Park Heights section. All 250 members of our congregation unanimously gave us their blessing. After all, they thought, what better place for us to live? Looking like Orthodox people, we would be in the best position to convert Orthodox Jews to Messianic Judaism!

"When we moved in, we expected our neighbors to be ecstatic. We figured they would think we were one of them. We have so much in common, I thought — kashrus, Shabbos, hair covering; maybe we can just disagree on Yoshke. The neighbors did not know how to handle us, so they just ignored us. I can't blame them, in retrospect. What else could they do?"

To avoid ruining their relationship with their Jewish neighbors, Penina and her husband decided to attend a local synagogue, rather than driving to the Messianic congregation on Shabbos. They chose Chabad since she had already met its rabbi, the owner of the Jewish bookstore she had frequented in Silver Spring, Maryland. "Everyone in the shul was very helpful, sweet, and welcoming," says Penina. "There were homeschoolers there, like us, and our kids made friends quickly. The shul members had no idea that we were Messianic. However, when my husband was called up for an *aliyah*, he admitted he wasn't Jewish. He never tried to hide it."

Soon after, Penina's husband decided to tell the rabbi that they believed in Yoshke, so as not to mislead anyone. The rabbi said to them, "You don't believe that anymore, do you?" When they told him they did, and saw his startled reaction, Penina started crying, thinking they were going to be kicked out of the shul and ostracized. "Then the rabbi asked us, 'What do you believe?' In that moment of emotionality, I cried out, 'I don't know what I believe! Just please don't kick us out of the shul!'"

The rabbi said to her, "You are still a Jew no matter what you believe, even though what you believe is not Judaism. You and the children may continue to come to shul, but we can't allow your husband here for now." There was only one caveat to that open-door policy — Penina needed to contact the Jews for Judaism organization and talk to one of their volunteers.

Coming Home: A New Shul, a New Soul

Penina agreed to speak to Mark Powers, who was at that time the director of the Baltimore center of Jews for Judaism. Soon the bricks of the seventeen-year-old foundation of her beliefs were pulled out from under her, and she came back to Judaism. By then, the Taylors' four children were six, eight, ten, and twelve. Her oldest, who was just about to be bar mitzvah, embraced Yiddishkeit on his own, and two months before turning thirteen he began studying his *haftarah*. Penina had taught him how to read Hebrew when he was little

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— her children had been raised with a Jewish identity, albeit somewhat corrupted.

“At this point,” Penina continues, “I began to talk to my father about our new belief and questioned him about his own beliefs. He began to change his views, and when he did, his congregants started leaving his congregation. At my son’s bar mitzvah, Mark Powers clarified points that my father had been thinking about, and eventually my parents also abandoned Messianic Judaism to return to authentic Judaism. My husband was still not Jewish, and because my son felt out of place in our shul for various reasons, he begged us to change shuls.

“Feeling ostracized in the *frum* world, I met with the rabbi

of the shul that my son was so insistent on attending. I told him that I’d given up everything to come back to Judaism, and that I could not do it alone. ‘I have no friends in either place now,’ I told him. After a few minutes of deep contemplation, he said he would tell his congregants to invite us; he assured me that he would now consider us an intermarried couple, rather than a missionary threat.”

Penina returned to Judaism in 2000. For several years, she volunteered in the Jewish community, and continued to study Torah intensively. Two and a half years later, her husband Pinchas decided to convert to Judaism, and, after a halachic conversion, they had a complete Jewish wedding, with a *chuppah* and *kesubah*.

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Penina’s Personal Tikun

Now fully integrated into the *frum* community, Penina decided to devote her extensive religious training and considerable energies to countering missionary groups. She worked as the staff educational consultant for the Baltimore branch of Jews for Judaism for a year and a half, speaking publicly, counseling, and fielding hotline calls from people of all backgrounds.

“I was well prepared to work for a countermissionary organization,” Penina says. “After all, I had been an ‘in-demand’ speaker at churches, youth groups, and women’s events for seventeen years. It was the same type of thing. Besides, I figured, I had my own personal *tikun* to make.”

In 2005, Penina’s parents made aliyah. The Taylors followed them in December 2006, and Penina established the Shomrei Emet Institute for Counter-Missionary Studies. After a short stint as executive director of Jews for Judaism in Jerusalem, Penina returned to her

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Finding Her Way Home: Judith’s Story

In this first-person account, Penina Taylor describes one of the cases that she dealt with during her countermissionary career.

It had been a very long day. Doing more clock-watching than work, I was attempting to enter book titles from our resource library into the database that I had created. The books had all been shelved in a relatively orderly fashion, but there was no database of all the books in the library, and many of the books were not labeled with either a shelving tag, nor with a name plate indicating they belonged to our organization. It was part of my job to bring order to this chaos. But at this moment, all I wanted to do was go home.

There was merely half an hour to go when the phone rang, raising me from my lull. On the other end of the line was a pleasant older woman who introduced herself as “Yehudah.” I thought it a little odd, Yehudah being a boy’s name, but I said hello and politely waited for her to provide some further details.

“Yehudah” told me that she was sixty-seven years old and that although born Jewish, she had become a Christian when she was thirty-five years old. Doing some quick math, I realized that this woman had been a Christian for nearly double the amount of time that I had. I had never met someone who had been a Christian for more than five or six years and come back to Judaism. Until meeting Yehudah, my own seventeen years was a record for me.

Yehudah went on to explain to me that she was facing a crisis. For the past several years she had a serious boyfriend who went to her Messianic congregation. He wasn’t Jewish, but that didn’t bother her because they both went to the same congregation. A few days before this phone call, they were having a discussion, and Yehudah’s boyfriend told her that the Holocaust would never have happened had the Jews accepted Yoshke.

Yehudah was not a Holocaust survivor herself, but she was born shortly before Kristallnacht, and had grown up keenly aware of the horrors that had taken place during that time. She couldn’t

believe that a Christian could be so callous as to make such a remark. This got her to thinking that maybe belief in Yoshke didn’t really transform hearts the way Christianity claims it does, and that’s when she decided to call us.

I asked Yehudah if she had ever studied the Jewish answers to Christianity’s claims for Yoshke. “Sure,” she answered. “I’ve been a Christian a long time, dear. I’ve studied them all!”

“That’s fantastic,” I said, “but would you be willing to look at them again with me?”

Yehudah agreed to take another look at the most commonly given proofs for Yoshke, and we set a time to study over the phone the following week. Before hanging up, I mentioned that her name was unusual for a woman. She told me that her name was actually Judith, but she wanted to go by her Hebrew name. She assumed that the Hebrew name for Judith was Yehudah. I explained to her that the feminine form was Yehudit, and she asked me to please call her Yehudit from that moment on.

The following week Yehudit called me right on schedule. First we went through Isaiah 7:14, then Isaiah 53 and Daniel 9. We did a “word-study” on messiah, salvation, and atonement. After about six weeks of studying together, Yehudit admitted that she had always examined these passages with the understanding that they had to be pointing to Yoshke; she never looked at them without that bias guiding her understanding of the verses. She was especially surprised to learn that many of the psalms that Christians quote as prophecies aren’t even prophetic in nature, and that there was no basis in Scripture for the Christian concept that every passage must have a second, messianic “fulfillment.”

Finally, Yehudit shared with me that she could no longer believe in Christianity. I encouraged her to find a rabbi and a synagogue. At this point Yehudit shared with me that she was pretty much homebound, needing a wheelchair for most things, and that getting to shul was just not possible. I asked Yehudit for her address and asked her if she would like a rabbi to visit her. She seemed very enthusiastic.

After doing a little research, I was in touch with a rabbi in Yehudit’s community and he agreed to go by and visit her. Yehudit called me to thank me and told me that she was now lighting candles on Friday night. A few weeks later, I received a call from Yehudit. She wanted to know “how to get Yoshke out of her head.” She said that she had tried to talk to the rabbi about it. He just couldn’t understand what she meant, but I completely understood.

For some time I had been helping ex-Christians — both born Jews and converts — with what I call “frame of reference issues.” That is, the Christian culture is very different from the Jewish culture, and many ex-Christians have a hard time understanding what is different about the way they talk or the

way they understand God. Working through these frame of reference issues helps them to better assimilate into the Jewish community and to become fully accepted members of the community.

Yehudit and I talked about some things she could do to address her “problem.” She also asked me for a substitute for the New Testament. Unlike the Tanach, the majority of the New Testament is about how to live one’s life (as a good Christian). I recommended that Yehudit begin learning *Pirkei Avos* (Sayings of the Fathers). Yehudit liked that idea and began to study *Pirkei Avos* every evening.

Several months had passed since Yehudit and I had been in contact and I decided to write to her and let her know that my family and I were moving to Israel in a few months. I wanted to assure her that although I would be halfway around the world, I was only an e-mail away. A few days later I received an e-mail from Yehudit’s niece informing me that Yehudit had passed away.

I couldn’t believe my eyes! Yehudit was gone? At first I was very distressed. Then I realized what an amazing thing I had been a part of. Yehudit had spent almost half her life devoted to a foreign religion — one that she was not created to be a part of. One thoughtless comment about the Holocaust had prompted her to call me, which had resulted in her returning to Judaism. Now, when she stood before the Heavenly throne she would be able to stand before G-d as a Jewish person who had found her way home. Instead of being upset, I was thankful for having been able to be a part of such an amazing woman’s journey.

work with Shomrei Emet and founded Torah Life Strategies — an organization whose mission is to help Jews establish a deeper relationship with Hashem and achieve personal fulfillment. She now travels regularly around the world, speaking to shuls, youth groups, seminaries, and yeshivos, as well as organizations and businesses. She also spends a significant amount of her time writing articles and books, and answering questions that are posed over the Internet and by phone.

Who does Penina speak to?

“The questions come from a wide variety of people — Jews who are considering other religions, Jewish Christians who want to challenge me, Jewish Christians who are having a religious crisis, non-Jewish Christians who want to understand Jewish objections to Christianity, and non-Jewish Christians who have had their own religious crisis and are looking for answers that they suspect may be found in Judaism. I have had many opportunities to create a *kiddush Hashem* when interfacing with non-Jews.”

What kind of phone calls does she get? “I get anywhere between five and thirty calls per month from people requesting advice concerning a family member who has converted out of Judaism. Some just want to know how to relate to them, others want me to talk to them. One time, a woman flew me in to her small community just to talk to her daughter. She was so desperate she didn’t know what else to do. I was only there for two days, but she felt it was worth it.”

Penina fits in a very special niche, as she is one of the few countermissionaries in the world who was born Jewish, became a Christian, was educated in Bible college with an emphasis in evangelism, co-led a messianic congregation, and then, after seventeen years, came back to Judaism. Her expertise comes from “being one of them” and not just from studying about it.

“I understand the Christian mindset, the appeal and the essence of their faith,” Penina explains. “More than that, I am one of only a few who are female. Because I don’t wear black and white and I don’t sport a long beard, I am less intimidating than many of my male colleagues. I have also consciously chosen to speak only in plain English, instead of sprinkling my speech with Yiddishisms, which makes me more accessible when the audience is not chareidi.”

Penina sees her job as much more encompassing than just teaching countermissionary arguments. She believes that if Jewish people can experience a Judaism that is vibrant, meaningful, and relevant, they’ll be far less likely to look other places for that fulfillment. This is why she also speaks on subjects such as cultivating an intimate relationship with Hashem, the power of the spoken word, dealing with fear, finding balance, and making Shabbos more meaningful. In her own words, she is “a cross between a coach and a spiritual mentor.”

A Wedding in Beit Shemesh: Coming Full Circle

As fulfilling as Penina’s professional life is, it is in the personal sphere that she feels she has gained the most.

“I often think of all the amazing things that Hashem brought me through; I feel that Hashem’s Hand has been so strong in my life, all along. Our children are now twenty-one, twenty, seventeen, and sixteen, and they are all *frum*. In May of 2009, my parents moved in with us, in Beit Shemesh. My

gratitude to HaKadosh Baruch Hu is perhaps best expressed in the last chapter of my book, *Coming Full Circle*, where I describe the first time I married off a child:”

On January 1st, 2009, Rachel and Meir were married in a beautiful hall at a yeshivah in Beit Shemesh. With all the activity and planning that goes into making a wedding, it wasn’t until the wedding day that my mind had the opportunity to reflect on the gravity of what was actually happening that day.

It wasn’t the difficulty of giving away our only daughter in marriage so much as what that event really meant. Here we were, in an Orthodox Jewish yeshivah, getting ready to give away our beautiful, religious, modest daughter to a serious, religious, modest young man. Meir’s father is a rabbi, and the children were being married according to Jewish law and custom, following in the footsteps of their ancestors, something observant and holy Jews had been doing for over 3,000 years.

As my husband and I walked our daughter to the chupah, my mind was flooded with a million thoughts. In a way, I saw my entire life flash before my eyes. I remembered all the changes we had been through in our lives, all the struggles, financial, physical and spiritual, many of which had culminated in this magical day. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined my daughter’s wedding — a beautiful, traditional Orthodox wedding.

My eyes began to tear as I was filled with gratitude to G-d for all that He had given me, including four beautiful, religious children and yes, a religious Jewish husband as well. I remembered all those hours of studying, of debating with Mark Powers in the Jews for Judaism office, of arguing and pleading with Pinchas to listen to what I had learned.

As I walked with Meir’s mother, guiding my daughter around the man she was about to be married to, I thought about the fact that we had finally closed the circle started all those generations ago in Europe. The circle left open by generations of Jews who had forgotten their heritage in exchange for the American ideal. And I knew in my heart of hearts that at that moment my Bubby and Zeide were in heaven smiling down on us.

During the reception, one of the guests approached me to wish me a mazel tov (congratulations). It was Melody, the woman who had been the assistant to Mark at Jews for Judaism during my search. She had spent so many long hours just waiting for me to finish talking to Mark so she could go home. Over the years, I am sure that Melody had wondered what would eventually come of all of it. Melody had made aliyah to Israel a few years before I did, and after I got there we had reconnected. Now we stood here together, sisters, remembering the long road we had both traveled to get to this moment.

Melody looked me in the eyes and with tears in hers said, “If not for all that, this would never have happened.” I looked at her and said, “Was it worth it?” There were no words with which to answer the question, and no words were needed in that moment of understanding and exquisite joy. With damp faces Melody and I simply embraced and I whispered in her ear, “Thank you.”

Then, I looked up, closed my eyes, and whispered to the One who had really made it all happen, “Thank You.” ■

Penina is currently arranging a tour in the US for this fall. She can be contacted through Family First for further information.